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How Teachers Can Look at Student Work Together — The “Embedded” Model

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FEB 27 2001

Step 1: Meet regularly as a group to look at student work — regular work right off the teacher's desk

Establish a “safe” environment, with ground rules that include using constructive language, respecting confidentiality, refraining from interrupting, speaking to the point to allow everyone a chance to speak. Take advantage of an experienced facilitator—a “coach”—to guide and deepen the discussion.

Step 2: Choose a recorder to keep a record of the discussion, findings, and action plan.

Record who was present, what work was looked at, what standards were used to develop the scoring guide, what was discovered about the quality of teaching and learning and, most important, what ideas for improvement of instructional practice were generated.

Step 3: Attempt the assignment yourselves.

Spend only enough time for everyone to get started—it is not necessary for teachers to *complete* the assignment—so that you can reflect on how you would approach the assignment.

Step 4: Use all that you know to create a scoring guide that reflects standards.

Begin with the state and local standards and bring in task descriptions, teacher experience, and other knowledge that has proven to foster rich discussions in answer to the question: What exactly is quality work and why is it so?

Step 5: Score the work to identify areas where students are not meeting standards.

Discuss any discrepancies so that you can begin to build a uniform understanding of standards-quality work. Don't give “half scores” such as “2.5”; agree that to earn a score, student work must meet *all* of the criteria in the scoring guide.

Step 6: Strategize effective practices that build on what students know — and what they still need to learn—to improve their work.

Based on what you see in the student work, brainstorm ways to improve instructional practice. Invite others to a session—a consultant with expertise in literacy, for example, or a specialist in writing. If your school has adopted a literacy model, look for strategies in the model. Identify a “best practice” that can be used schoolwide or across a grade level.

Step 7: Specify an action plan for implementing these changes in instructional practice.

- Q. Which of our suggested changes can be accomplished immediately in the classroom?
- Q. For which changes do teachers require professional development? What kinds of professional development?
- Q. Which changes require schoolwide action? Which require district support?
- Q. How will we implement these changes?

Ask good questions

- Q. Were the directions clear? Was the task or the problem clear?
- Q. Did students know what they were expected to do? Did they have exemplars against which they could judge their work?
- Q. Did the assignment match the skills and content the students should know?
- Q. Did the assignment help students meet standards? Which standards? How?

"Looking at Student Work" – The Why & How

A strategy for assessing student learning – and improving instruction

In many Boston schools, teachers have been meeting in small groups to "look at student work." By looking at the work students are doing and by comparing that work to the district's standards, teachers have been able to see what instructional practices are most effective and what changes need to be made, classroom by classroom, to help all students learn at higher levels.

Reasons to Look at Student Work as a Teacher Group

- to identify what skills students need to learn—in a classroom, across a grade or subject area, or even across the school
- to find high-level work and identify the instructional strategies that resulted in that work
- to improve assignments and teacher feedback and to track students' progress over time
- to inform instruction in a classroom—or in a whole school
- to help plan professional development

But teachers have always looked at student work, haven't they?

Every good teacher looks at student work, to see how students are doing and to give them a grade; but that is done by each individual teacher, in his or her classroom, and against each teacher's personal standards.

When teachers *collaborate* on looking at student work, however, the goal changes. It is no longer a process for grading papers or scoring work but for analyzing an assignment and understanding students' responses to it. The process raises good questions for the group: "What does this student work tell us about student learning? What do students know and what are they able to do? Was the assignment well designed to help students acquire knowledge and exercise skills?"

Most importantly, all teachers can ask: "What can I change in my classroom tomorrow to improve my own teaching so that my students can meet the standards? What can we change across the school?"

An "embedded" model for looking at student work

When the 21st Century Schools began their work in 1996, one of the "essentials" they were asked to address was to collectively compare individual student work to the Citywide Learning Standards, and the Boston Plan trained principals, teachers, and coaches in looking at student work, using a model developed by The Education Trust.

At the same time, the school district was beginning to implement standards and asked teachers to use certain

protocols—student products, task descriptions, and "Did I...?" sheets—to assess student work. These were designed to complement the district's Citywide Learning Standards.

This past year, staff from the Boston Plan and the school district worked together to develop a model that "embeds" the district model into The Education Trust model. What follows is a protocol that is based on experience with each model and that is approved for use in all schools. ♦

Do You Want to Learn More?

The Education Trust publishes an easy-to-read guide to their model of looking at student work, "Front-End Alignment: Using Standards to Steer Educational Change."

To order a copy (\$12.50), call The Education Trust: ☎ 202-293-1217

